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OREGON STATE CONSERVATION
COMMISSION

State vs. National Control
of Public Forests.



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State *vs.* National Control of Public Forests

FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF A
WESTERN STATE

BY THE

Oregon State Conservation Commission

*Appointed by the Governor under Act of Legislature
creating said commission to "set forth the condition
of the natural resources of the state, together with
such recommendations for legislation as may be
deemed advisable, or other means of protecting or
promoting the development and use of the same."*

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would be disastrous in results."

PORTLAND, OREGON

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STATE vs. NATIONAL CONTROL OF PUBLIC FORESTS



OR some time it has been apparent that a determined effort will be made to turn the national forests over to the respective states within whose borders they lie. *Although at present private ownership of the national forests is not being made the issue, it is obvious that while this may not be the purpose of some, the result would be none the less certain.*

With the expense of maintenance and protection involved, the enormous stake at issue, the opportunity for manipulating state politics and playing upon the pride, greed and selfishness of those believing they will in some way be personal gainers thereby, *we but delude ourselves in thinking these things are being overlooked and that the underlying purpose of those who originated this movement is not to eliminate all public control and replace it with monopolistic ownership.*

While the issue as presented on its face is state vs. national control, and not the elimination of public ownership, it may be accepted as a fact that if the first step is taken the second will surely follow.

A large part of Oregon is included in national forests. It is one of the public land states, is vitally interested in the proper disposition of the public lands and is profoundly affected by their administration. The future development of the state in a large measure depends upon the use of its natural resources. Being thus situated, the Oregon State Conservation Commission is impelled by a sense of its duty and the obligation it owes the public to present, as briefly as may be, its views upon this most important question.

Objects of Public Control

EVERY good citizen believes that in all such questions the interest of the general public is primary, and that the real object to be secured in the handling of public resources is to bring about their widest and best use while at the same time giving the amplest range of opportunity for self-help and individual effort. All will agree that monopolistic ownership and individual control of the necessities of life or public functions is not to be desired.

At the present time, as the majority of those who favor state control concede, the forests should remain public property. The issue as now presented is state vs. national control. In order to pass upon this issue understandingly, certain fundamental principles should be recalled and certain facts stated.

The national forests are the property of the nation. As to this there is no question. If the nation is called upon to give outright this vast property (vast and valuable both actually and potentially) to the states, then the burden is surely on the state to show how this great trust is to be administered, so that those for whom it is granted will be better, or even as well, protected than they now are in their rights in and to it.

The suggestion often advanced that other states have enjoyed properties of a similar nature and wasted or misused them, and therefore that we should be permitted to follow the same course if we so desire, does not seem to us very conclusive. The contrary would seem taught by their experience. The direct effect of the forests on water supply and use is recognized as a fact and is considered a proper subject of national jurisdiction and control. In consequence, in some of the very states which so unwisely used their forests, the national government is now expending large sums from the national treasury to restore the forest growth on the blasted slopes of their mountain sides. The course wisdom and foresight would have prescribed was to prevent the total destruction of the forests and at the same time not only maintain a constant timber supply, but a protected stream flow as well.

Functions Not Bounded by State Lines

FROM a national standpoint these public forests fill other functions than merely to furnish lumber and other timber products—*functions and uses which extend far beyond state lines and involve the welfare of many people.* They cover and protect the headwaters of streams used for navigation, irrigation and power. They prevent or minimize constantly recurring disastrous floods, which know not state lines. They retard soil erosion and in many ways have a direct effect upon natural conditions of the greatest consequence. The timber supply of the future for all the people, not of any particular state, is nation-wide in its importance, and the continuity of its production a national problem. Natural conditions for maintaining the timber growth and supply not being equally favorable, those states not able to supply their own wants must depend on the sections peculiarly adapted therefor to supply the same. The foregoing propositions will not be seriously controverted.

The national forests are now under the control of the federal government and the expense of their protection, amounting to about \$4,000,000 a year, is paid from the nation's treasury. In Oregon alone there is expended in this work about \$480,000 a year, an amount nearly one-sixth as great as the state's total expenditures for all governmental purposes. This figure does not include sums expended in actual fire-fighting, which in destructive fire seasons such as of 1910 and 1911 amounts to \$75,000 to \$112,000 additional. Fires and accompanying losses and disasters are not confined to state lines. This dread destroyer knows neither geographical lines nor governmental divisions.

Would Cost the State Too Much

FORTUNATELY Oregon has recognized both the value of this great asset and *its* obligation towards it and, as it should, works in the closest co-operation with federal agencies and private owners. Happily there are but few who

do not recognize the enormous present and future value of the forests. But is it a matter of doubt that the state would fail in its care and protection *should the entire burden be cast upon it?* Such a course would inevitably lead to but one result: the dismemberment of the forests.

The Forest Service also conducts studies and experiments as to the use and cultivation of woods, the production of by-products, etc., which have been of enormous value to the public as well as to the lumber industries. Other collateral activities are also under its control. We but refer to the roads, trails, telephone lines, etc., built and maintained as measures for protection against fire. Reforestation of denuded areas and better stocking of other portions involve additional present burdens.

On account of the location of the national forests, cost of protection is certain to exceed income for years to come. Notwithstanding this fact, there is paid to the state and counties for road and school purposes in the counties where sales are made, 35 per cent of the gross receipts from all sales of timber. While this is not now a large sum (amounting in Oregon last year to about \$60,000), it will constantly increase and be a source of perpetual revenue to the state.

The Fallacious Tax Argument

THIS naturally brings up the question of taxation and the alleged loss of taxes to the state by reason of the national forest being nontaxable. This is a favorite argument of those who do not believe in public ownership of the forests. It is largely fallacious. If the state owned the forests they would not be taxable, which in the present aspect of the case would be a sufficient answer. Moreover, the taxable value of forests in remote uninhabited regions or summits of mountain ranges would be very problematical, and, in our opinion, eliminating the undesirability of turning the forests over to private ownership, *the perpetual income the state will eventually receive from sales of stumpage would far exceed any amount that could probably be received from taxes.* Moreover, as we

have stated, the tax argument is based on private ownership, a proposition now openly advocated by but few and not involved in this discussion.

State's Real Interest

WHAT is the state's real interest in the national forests and their administration? In conservation and use for *all* purposes. Every foot of land available for settlement and home making should be open to settlers. Every encouragement should be given the settler. The use of resources of every kind within the national forests should be promoted. The sheep and cattle man, the mining prospector, the engineer looking for power to develop and use, all should be encouraged. In other words, the interest of the state lies in use. However, to secure this condition does not require a change of ownership or abandonment of public control. On the contrary, conditions favoring the largest use in every form, represent both the purpose of the law and the policy of the agricultural department.

State Has the Best Of It Now

INDEED from a practical standpoint the state today is in a better position than if it owned the forests. The protection of the forests is paid for by the federal government, and the state receives 35 per cent of the gross revenue. The experiments and studies as to use, etc., of which we receive the benefit, are carried on by the government. Not a tree can be felled and transformed into lumber without leaving 80 per cent of the receipts in the hands of labor and those furnishing supplies. Is it to be assumed the state's management would be more efficient, less expensive, and more satisfactory than that of the Forest Service? Or would the result be that which is desired by some—dissatisfaction, criticism, and finally sale, and the public forest gone forever? Are not private forest lands now held in few enough hands, or can it be the desire to make the monopoly complete and have this necessity of life

entirely under the private control of the favored few? This great public resource is now owned by the public, and it should always be held, used and controlled in the interest of the public.

Agricultural Lands

BEFORE taking up other aspects of the question we present certain figures which may prove of interest. A vast section of this state is within the national forests. The net acreage is 13,658,679. The true significance of the figures can not be apprehended without some analysis. Generally the figures are thrown out without explanation as indicating enormous withdrawal of tillable or habitable lands that would otherwise be settled.

Speaking generally the forest area is confined to the mountainous regions of the Cascades, Coast Range and Blue Mountains, the highest and most inaccessible regions of the state. The great percentage is as yet far removed from transportation facilities. Approximately 43 per cent of this area is at an altitude of more than 5000 feet above sea level, about 17½ per cent 4000 to 5000 feet above sea level, and about 9 per cent 3000 to 4000 feet above sea level. These facts are of great significance in considering this question. As to much of this area the surface is so broken and the slopes so steep as to make cultivation out of the question. On these mountains the forests stand as guardians of our water sheds affecting not only this state but other states as well, a matter of direct concern to the well-being of every citizen now living or hereafter to live in the vast domain protected by them.

There are, however, lands within the national forests which should be restored for settlement and will be in the immediate future. But will it be urged this purely administrative question, or irritating rules or acts of too zealous subordinates furnish an excuse for abandoning the public forests and turning over the heritage of all to enrich the few? Such matters are easily remedied.

We should not allow ourselves to be misled by a false hue and cry. The experience with the Olympic National Forest in Washington is still fresh in mind. In 1901, under an insistent demand to throw a portion open to settlement, 705,600 acres were released. In ten years, 526,520 acres were in the hands of private owners holding it for its timber. Over 178,000 acres were included in five holdings, and one man owned 81,630 acres. Of the area originally timbered it is said on authority "only about 600 acres are under cultivation." It is not to be doubted that the purposes of those starting and maintaining the agitation were entirely accomplished.

The Commission's Conclusions

THIS Commission does not wish its position misunderstood. From a selfish standpoint, if from no higher motive, as citizens of this state directly interested in its speedy development, it favors the widest and wisest use of our natural resources. It believes all agricultural land should be open to the settler, and every encouragement given the prospector. It believes in maintaining in every possible way the greatest possible opportunity to the individual striving to better his condition. To do this, we do not believe the interest of the public should be deliberately sacrificed under the guise of development or under the temptation for immediate personal gain. The forests are a public asset, a public resource. They fill a function in nature's plan, that necessarily not only now but always will be important in the orderly and growing life of our nation. They will not only serve, if conserved, to furnish forever a never failing source of supply of lumber, but under God's providence serve even more useful purposes in other directions.

The sole question is what agency will best secure results? The forests are as national as the rivers they help maintain, and as broad in their influence as the plains for which they store the life giving water. It would seem that every one except those directly interested in profiting thereby has all to lose and nothing to gain by a transfer from nation to state.

In our opinion the proposition is wrong in principle and would be disastrous in results. The time may come when such a step may be justifiable and proper, but this is an eventuality not necessary now to discuss.

This Commission would fail in its duty and be unfaithful to the trust imposed in it did it not defend this heritage of all the people against any attempt, no matter how well meaning, for its spoliation. In the interests of the whole people we submit that this great resource should remain public property, used and controlled in the interest of the public, and all who believe this should resist all attempts in whatever guise they appear, to transfer the national forests to the states, as the first step towards a complete private monopoly of the forests, and the first gun of a direct attack upon true conservation.

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